

HUMOR AND PRODUCT TYPE PRIMING EFFECTS ON CONSUMER INDULGENCE

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Abstract

This research highlights the results from research on whimsical humor cognitive priming and product type on consumer indulgence. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions where whimsical humor cognitive priming and product type in the fast moving consumer goods domain were experimentally manipulated. Consumer attitude, behavior, and choice in hypothetical decision-making scenarios, brand relationship, self-reward, and indulgent consumer behavior were utilized as dependent measures. There was evidence of an interaction, suggesting that whimsical humor cognitive priming effects were pronounced when the product category was creative in nature. This preliminary research adds to other scholarly efforts examining the role of humor on influencing consumer behavior. Implications are discussed from a branding perspective.

Keywords: Cognitive Priming, Whimsicality, Indulgence, Consumer Choice

INTRODUCTION

There are many factors for consideration when attempting to understand the cognitive primes that lead consumers toward indulgent spending. One such variable to examine is consumer self-control and how certain cognitive frames enhance or inhibit self-reward focus (Baumeister, 2002). An emerging topic in the area of indulgence is the effect of humor on subsequent consumer decision-making processes. Humor is an interesting cognitive frame that has the potential to influence consumption. As such, one area that has a growing literature is how whimsical humor employed by brands in their communication with their target audiences influences prospective consumer behavior. Many brands utilize whimsical humor in product design or across communication platforms. In general, whimsicality focused appeals are characterized defined by their capricious, impish, and anthropomorphized attributes (Nenkov & Scott, 2014).

Brands' whimsical humor efforts manifest in today's consumer retail environment, both in traditional brick-and-mortar stores as well as in online shopping. In their well-known research paper on whimsicality, Nenkov and Scott (2014) found that exposure to whimsical humor triggered mental representations of inhibited self-reward focus and increased indulgence. The mental schemas primed by whimsical humor augmented consumers' self-reward focus and therefore led to less self-control and more indulgent consumer behavior. Across four experiments, Nenkov and Scott (2014) found that whimsical products led to increased indulgent consumption among their sample using actual behavioral outcome variables. They posited that by introducing a whimsical dimension of humor, which in turn primed fun and enjoyment, research

participants exhibited less self-control in their consumer choices. This added to the cognitive priming literature (Dijksterhuis, Smith, van Baaren, & Wigboldus, 2005) by establishing a hitherto cognitive heuristic whereby exposure to whimsical humor alters consumers' mental representations; leading them to mimic the whimsical nature of these products in their choices. Nenkov and Scott (2014) whimsical research provided a welcome perspective to the indulgence and self-reward literature (Baumeister, 2002; Kivetz & Simonson 2002) by providing evidence that incidental or intentional exposure to whimsical humor cognitive priming is an element of indulgent consumer behavior.

Much of the research on whimsical humor priming has focused on anthropomorphism in product design as well as a promotional communications, including but not limited to brand symbols, brand characters, or brand personality, or brand persona (Sherman, Haidt, & Coan, 2009). Broadly defined, marketing-related anthropomorphism occurs when animals and other non-human characters endowed with human-like characteristics are used to represent various aspects of the brand. Brands employ anthropomorphism as a creative escapism for their consumers where fantasy, imaginative thought, and playful interactions between consumers and products occur in a dynamic manner. When implemented properly, it can create a long-lasting synergy with appropriate consumer segments (Veer, 2013). The use of anthropomorphism in a marketing environment utilizes characters that benefit brands by establishing a strong identity and favorable associations (Hosany, Prayag, Martin, & Lee, 2013). The whimsical humor aspects of anthropomorphized brand characters can also morph into a deeper relationship with multiple customer relationship management touch points and purchase opportunities, one that occurs in a rapidly shifting omnichannel environment.

Aggarwal and McGill (2011) found that applied consumer researchers are able to utilize anthropomorphic whimsicality via human-like characteristics in objects as an instrument to enhance positive consumer transactions over their lifetime. This is often referred to as customer lifetime value, and it begins an early age. One can extrapolate that brand anthropomorphism via whimsical humor cognitive priming can be introduced to consumers as children, at an impactful time in their life. Then, these young consumers will continue with the brand throughout adulthood, in effect developing an attachment to a branded symbol or character. Perhaps this consumer-brand relationship, developed and strengthened using whimsical humor cognitive primes, emboldens consumers to purchase more and even engage in indulgent consumption. From a marketer's lens, the outcome is positive—to enhance their business portfolio (Aggarwal & McGill, 2011). However, a societal concern for consumers is that they may not realize these cognitive primes are being placed in their immediate consumer environments. How can brands reconcile these potential ethical concerns? This topic should be considered when evaluating the landscape of strategically placed whimsical humor cognitive primes.

This purpose of this preliminary investigation is to examine the role of whimsical humor cognitive priming on consumer behavior, with the ultimate goal to disentangle the aforementioned variables embedded in the larger process of indulgent consumption. There are important applications to this research. The results of this research are important to for marketers as they attempt to influence consumer consumption habits. The research is also valuable for

consumers because it can be used to inform consumers of how stimuli in their consumer environment can be strategically manipulated. They can use this information to reduce impulse purchases and other harmful consumer choices by being aware of cognitive primes in their environment. Overall, a more comprehensive understanding of whimsical humor cognitive primes will lead to more advanced theory development in consumer researchers' understanding of impulse consumption and self-reward behavior. As noted above, there are practical applications under consideration, as well.

METHODOLOGY

In this research, students enrolled in introductory courses at a university in the United States of America were randomly assigned to one of four conditions: 1) whimsical humor cognitive priming X fast moving consumer good creative product type (WH/CP), 2) no whimsical humor cognitive priming X fast moving consumer good creative product type (NWH/CP), 3) whimsical humor cognitive priming X fast moving consumer good utilitarian product type (WH/UP), 2) no whimsical humor cognitive priming X fast moving consumer good utilitarian product type (NWH/UP).

Whimsical cognitive priming conditions and product type were controlled in a laboratory experiment to maintain strong internal validity. In each condition, participants viewed two different objects in the fast moving consumer goods (FMCGs) domain that were matched on their whimsical nature. The objects were in different product type classes, creative or utilitarian, to determine if there would be an interactive effect of whimsical humor cognitive priming and product category. Participants read fictionalized product information to provide a realistic context to the presentation of both creative and utilitarian FMCGs items. The fictionalized product descriptions contained germane information about the creative/utilitarian product including: a brief history (providing a chronological background for the product), general consumer interest in the product (providing a framework for product identification), and other product attributes (providing context for how consumers use product characteristics for criteria evaluation). After random assignment to one of the four scenarios, participants were then asked to complete a series of consumer attitude, consumer-brand relationship, consumer-brand identification, indulgence, self-control, and behavioral intention measures. All participants completed the measures in the same order. The same fictional FMCGs scenarios for each of the four conditions during the experiment without variation. Therefore, the only difference among these four conditions was the whimsical humor cognitive priming and product type manipulations. Therefore, the effect of these two variables on subsequent consumer attitude and choice behavior could be examined. Demographic variables were also measured and used for subsequent analyses. The participants were thanked for their involvement and completely debriefed upon completion of their experimental session. The debriefing session was an opportunity to provide additional information to participants about the research topic being studied.

RESULTS

2-Way ANOVAs were utilized to examine differences among the following four conditions: 1) whimsical humor cognitive priming X fast moving consumer good creative product type

(WH/CP), 2) no whimsical humor cognitive priming X fast moving consumer good creative product type (NWH/CP), 3) whimsical humor cognitive priming X fast moving consumer good utilitarian product type (WH/UP), 2) no whimsical humor cognitive priming X fast moving consumer good utilitarian product type (NWH/UP). This is enabled the researcher to examine the interaction between cognitive priming and product type, as well as these variables independently.

For the composite measure assessing prospective choice, there were differences when comparing the conditions for participants. The pattern of means for WH/CP, NWH/CP, WH/UP, and NWH/UP conditions, respectively, supported the prediction that whimsical humor cognitive primes and product type would have an interactive effect on indulgence focused consumer behavior. More specifically, there was a significant difference when comparing the WH/CP, NWH/CP, WH/UP, and NWH/UP conditions. Participants in the WH/CP conditioned reported consumer attitudes and behaviors that were consistent with high self-reward behavior. The means of the WH/CP, NWH/CP, WH/UP, and NWH/UP conditions followed the following pattern from high to low: WH/CP, WH/UP, NWH/CP, and NWH/UP. This suggests that exposure to whimsical humor cognitive priming leads to the most pronounced effect when paired with a creative product. However, the combination of whimsical humor cognitive priming and utilitarian product type also leads consumers to engage in more indulgent consumer behavior, even though the product category inherently does not induce this type of choice behavior. Across product types, in both no whimsical humor cognitive priming conditions there was no evidence of indulgence-based consumption. Overall, for choice behavior dependent variables, there was evidence that exposure to whimsical cognitive primes across different product categories resulted in different consumer attitudes and behaviors where participants exhibited less control and more indulgence, dependent upon the assignment of whimsical humor cognitive priming by product type conditions.

For the composite measure assessing consumer-brand attitudes, there were differences when comparing the conditions for participants. The pattern of means for WH/CP, NWH/CP, WH/UP, and NWH/UP conditions, respectively, supported the prediction that whimsical humor cognitive primes and product type would have an interactive effect on consumer-brand relationship. More specifically, there was a significant difference when comparing the WH/CP, NWH/CP, WH/UP, and NWH/UP conditions. Participants in the WH/CP conditioned reported stronger alignment with brands that expressed attributes of indulgence-based consumption. Similar to the prospective choice outcome measure, the means of the WH/CP, NWH/CP, WH/UP, and NWH/UP conditions followed the following pattern from high to low: WH/CP, WH/UP, NWH/CP, and NWH/UP. This suggests that exposure to whimsical humor cognitive priming resulted in an interactive effect when paired with a specific product type. It was interesting that the combination of whimsical humor cognitive priming and utilitarian product type also leads consumers to develop stronger consumer-brand attitudes. Across product types, in both no whimsical humor cognitive priming conditions there was limited evidence of indulgence-based consumer-brand attitudes. Overall, for brand relationship dependent variables, there was evidence that exposure to whimsical cognitive primes across different product categories resulted in different consumer-brand attitudes where participants exhibited more indulgence-based

attitudes. As noted, this varied based on the interaction of whimsical humor cognitive priming by product type classification.

For the composite measure assessing broad-based consumer attitudes, there were differences when comparing the conditions for participants. Once again, the pattern of means for WH/CP, NWH/CP, WH/UP, and NWH/UP conditions, respectively, supported the prediction that whimsical humor cognitive primes and product type would have an interactive effect on self-reward and consumer indulgence attitude measures. The results indicated that there was a significant difference when comparing the WH/CP, NWH/CP, WH/UP, and NWH/UP conditions. Participants in the WH/CP conditioned reported broad-based consumer attitudes that were consistent with low self-control consumer behavior. The means of the WH/CP, NWH/CP, WH/UP, and NWH/UP conditions followed the following pattern from high to low: WH/CP, WH/UP, NWH/CP, and NWH/UP. This suggests that exposure to whimsical humor cognitive priming leads to a high self-reward consumption effect when paired with product in the operationally defined creative category class. However, the combination of whimsical humor cognitive priming and utilitarian product type also leads consumers to self-report attitudes and beliefs consistent with indulgent consumer behavior. This occurred despite the uncharacteristic nature of the product category class. In both no whimsical humor cognitive priming conditions, across both manipulated product types, there was non-significant evidence of indulgence-based consumption. Overall, for broad-based consumer attitudinal dependent variables, there was evidence that exposure to whimsical cognitive primes across different product categories resulted in differential self-reporting. More specifically, participants reported less control and more indulgence, dependent upon the interactive combination of whimsical humor cognitive priming by product type.

DISCUSSION

The research findings suggest that there was an interactive effect when examining whimsical humor and product type on indulgence in various consumer attitude, choice, and behavior decision-making scenarios. A consistent finding from this preliminary research was that the combination of whimsical humor cognitive priming by fast moving consumer good creative product type resulted in self-reported consumer behavior consistent with low self-control and high self-reward. The results suggest that consumers' attitudes and choice behavior toward using a product for indulgent or non-indulgent purposes can vary depending on the presence of absence of a whimsical prime in their consumer environment as well as the intended usage of the product. This research provides preliminary support for the underlying process of whimsical humor as a priming manipulation by demonstrating that whimsicality indirectly influences consumer behavior. In general, there is experimental evidence to support the notion that whimsicality can prime mental representations of fun and spontaneity (Nenkov & Scott, 2014). This in turn can non-consciously lead consumer to utilize a self-reward schema as they approach their consumption decisions.

One important implication from this research is how consumers can apply their understanding of cognitive priming to the various marketing environments that they interact with on a daily basis. Consumers should attempt to increase their awareness of whimsical humor cognitive primes are

frequently employed by marketers; these implicit “nudges” in their consumer environment can have potentially unfavorable long-term effects on them as it encourages indulgent consumption. By increasing recognition of these stimuli, consumers can avoid imprudent purchases, and noxious consumer choice behavior, via awareness of these key drivers in their proximal shopping environment. A second important implication from this research is how brands can implement whimsical humor cognitive priming to potentially increase the sales of their products, especially creative-focused ones in the FMCGs domain. Brands can strategically utilize whimsical humor in their marketing mix: how they promote to their target audiences, how they design and package their product offering, and in the strategic development of brand imaging. A scan of the branding landscape shows that many brands already position themselves using unconventional attributes (Aaker, Fournier, & Brassel, 2004). One can extrapolate that by lengthening these decisions to additional aspects of their marketing mix there are opportunities to extend the brand and enhance the brand equity. This has the potential to lead to increased profits. As such, strategic choreographing of the brand can result in many favorable outcomes, both measureable (financial) and inestimable (brand perception).

An important topic for future research is role of brand anthropomorphism as a prime in the context of consumer indulgence. Brand anthropomorphist characteristics might serve as a mediator variable that can better highlight the nuances of the relationship between whimsical humor and indulgent consumption. Anthropomorphic marketing often uses characters that help brands establish an easily recognized identity. It would be interesting to examine from an empirical perspective where whimsical humor cognitive priming and brand anthropomorphism constructs overlap. This could enhance researchers’ understanding of key predictors of indulgent consumer behavior. In addition, future research should focus on related variables that intervene in the alignment of whimsical humor cognitive priming and product category. This has the potential to disentangle the nuances of the relationship between these two variables and the outcome variable of indulgent consumption.

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